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ABSTRACT

Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU), a program operating on funds from the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), was initiated at Arkansas State University in 1989. The 60-day program is targeted to economically disadvantaged 14- and 15-year-olds who are on grade level and have been identified as being likely to drop out of high school, but are not exceptional in other ways (e.g., learning disabled or emotionally disturbed). Participants live on campus and work 20 hours a week and earn one semester credit in English and mathematics. Students are administered the Metropolitan Achievement Test at the beginning and the end of the program to assess the program's academic effectiveness. In 1990, students made academic progress in reading, language, and mathematics. The job developer is responsible for locating jobs for students, keeping records of time worked, monitoring job performance, and acting as a liason between the YOU program and the job site supervisors. Part of the federal minimum wage is paid to students weekly and the rest is placed in an account and given to the student after completing the program. A component of the program, the Job Club, emphasizes the development of good work habits. In addition, students are provided with health and dental care, counseling, tutoring, recreational activities, and educational field trips. Students completing the program are followed through high school and student grades are reported to the follow-up coordinator each semester. Although exact figures are not available, the program for 1990 seemed successful as all students are still in school one year later. (LP)

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Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Students: Youth Opportunities Unlimited

Introduction

Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.) is a program aimed at preventing school dropout among low income students who have been identified as being at risk of dropping out of high school. Y.O.U. had its beginnings in a program first implemented at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas in 1972. The program there originally targeted college freshmen from families of migrant and seasonal farm workers. A similar project began for high school students. The program spread to other campuses in Texas, and eventually to several other states.

In Arkansas, Y.O.U. began at Henderson State University in 1988. Its first year at Arkansas State University was 1989. The number of participants in Arkansas has grown from 50 in 1988 to over 400 in 1990. Another increase in numbers is expected in 1991.

The intent of the Y.O.U. program is to allow students to discover that they can be successful in life and to give them a sense of accomplishment. Y.O.U. affords participants the opportunity to work 20 hours a week on campus and to earn one semester credit in English and mathematics. In addition, participants receive medical and dental examinations and instruction in study skills, health, and computer literacy. Tutoring is provided to students who need it. Students are taken on field trips on the weekends.

Funding of the Program

Y.O.U. operates on funds from the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). The universities that conduct the program contract with the Service Delivery Areas which administer JTPA funds. The current funding formula in Arkansas calls for $3250 for each student enrolled in the program. This amount covers room, board, tuition, and wages paid to the student for work done while in the program. Provision is made in the contract for the refund of money not used for room, board, and wages for students who leave the program early.

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Selection of Participants

The Y.O.U. target population is those economically disadvantaged 14- and 15-year-olds who are enrolled in school on grade level, but due to academic, environmental, or motivational factors, have been identified as being likely to drop out of school prior to graduation from high school. Y.O.U. is not intended to be a panacea for all ills affecting students in this age group. Experience has indicated that students in several categories usually do not gain maximum benefit from participation in the program. These include students with learning disabilities, those with significant behavior disorders, those who are emotionally disturbed, those in special education, and students in gifted and talented programs. Students from gifted and talented programs usually do not benefit from the academic program of Y.O.U. Students from the other groups generally are not ready for the increased responsibility and independence that participation in the program demands.

Students are recruited by the representatives of the Service Delivery Agencies that administer JTPA funds. They work with school counselors, teachers, and administrators to identify students who meet the age, grade, and at-risk qualifications. Those students who are selected for Y.O.U. must also meet family income limitations.

After a sufficient number of qualified potential participants have been selected, an orientation session is held. A representative of the institution conducting the program meets with the students and their parents. In this meeting, participants are told what they can expect from the program, and what the program expects from them. A number of forms are filled out, such as parental permission for the student to participate, medical information, and authorization for medical treatment in case of an emergency.

Characteristics of Participants

The participants in the Y.O.U. program at Arkansas State University in 1990 had the following characteristics:

33 had family incomes of less than $5,000.
11 had family incomes of $5,000 - 7,500.
25 had family incomes of $7,501 - 10.000.
7 had family incomes of $10,001 - 15,000.
6 had family incomes of over $15,000.
44 came from single parent households.
41 had a different surname from custodial parent or guardian.
29 were African-Americans.
54 were Caucasians.
7 came from families of two members.
18 came from families of three members.
18 came from families of four members.
22 came from families of five members.

9 came from families of six members.
8 came from families of seven members.
4 came from families of seven members.
4 came from families of eight members.

Residential Component

For participants in the program, Y.O.U. is 60 days long. All participants go to a location that is at least 50 miles from their homes. This practice discourages friends and family members from dropping in to visit at times when the students are supposed to be involved in program activities. Except in emergencies, students do not go home during the program. They live in campus residence halls where they are under much more strict supervision than college students would be.

The daily schedule for students is quite demanding. They leave their rooms at 7:00 a.m. and return at 8:30 p.m. Between these times, students go to classes, work, go to tutoring sessions, have instruction in job-related skills, study skills, computer literacy, and participate in recreation. Saturdays are usually spent on recreational or educational field trips. Sundays are only a little quieter, with those who wish to do so going to church, getting laundry done, and having recreation in the afternoon. The evening meal on Sunday is frequently a cookout or a pizza party.

Academic Component

Great efforts are made to keep the academic program from being like the typical school that the students just left. Emphasis is placed on participation in classes and on keeping the classes small to allow much interaction between the students and the teacher. The English and mathematics classes ranged in size from eight to 13 students, and an aide assisted each teacher.

As a measure of the academic effectiveness of the program, students are given the Metropolitan Achievement Test at the beginning and at the end of the program. In 1990, students in the program had mean gains on the MAT-6 of 1.12 years in reading, .96 years in language, .9 years in mathematics, and 1.21 years on the total battery.

The curriculum for the math and English classes was based on the ninth and tenth grade curriculum guides of the Arkansas State Board of Education. All of the professional staff members in the instructional program held Arkansas teacher certification in their respective teaching areas.

The English curriculum focused on the use of basic skills such as grammar, reference skills, vocabulary, reading, writing, spelling, and oral communication. Whenever possible, these skills were taught in an applied context rather than as isolated topics to be learned separately.

The math curriculum also emphasized application over rote memorization in isolation. The primary focus was on

understanding and applying mathematical concepts through problem solving techniques, data handling, geometry, and the use of algebraic formulae to solve problems.

Study skills instruction was also provided to all students. Motivation, time management, note-taking, and test preparation techniques, as well as other topics, were discussed in these classes. Students also received instruction in health, nutrition, and sex education. Instruction emphasized topics such as personal hygiene, safety and first aid, substance and drug abuse, the relationship between health and nutrition, the physiology of reproduction, and abstinence as a form of birth control.

Work Experience

Students work in jobs on campus 20 hours each week. Typical jobs include office work, working in the theater scene shop, working in the vending department, and working in the university museum. Because of child labor laws, participants cannot work in jobs which would require them to operate machinery or to engage in other activities which could be dangerous. One staff member, called the Job Developer, is responsible for finding jobs for all students, for keeping records of time worked, and for monitoring job performance. The job developer also serves as a liaison between the Y.O.U. program and the job site supervisors. Before students begin work, the job developer contacts the job site supervisors to ascertain the number of students needed at each site, to inform the supervisors of the requirements of the program, and to explain the reporting and evaluation procedures. Students earn the federal minimum wage rate for their work. They are not, however, paid all of their wages each week. They receive a check for $20 every Friday. The remainder of their earnings goes into a safe-keeping account. A few weeks after the program is over, participants receive a check for the balance of their summer earnings.

Job Club

Each day, students attend a session called Job Club. A number of activities take place in Job Club. Students are given instruction in job etiquette, the importance of being prompt and dependable on the job, the necessity of performing duties adequately, and the satisfaction of doing a job well. They also receive instruction in money management and budgeting. Speakers from many different professions are invited to tell the students about their jobs, how they got where they are now, and obstacles they had to overcome to reach this point in their careers. Extra effort is expended to get speakers whose backgrounds are similar to those of the students in the program. This portion of the program seems to be particularly effective in getting students to see that

having few advantages growing up does not condemn one to a life of poverty.

Health Care

Many of the students in the program have received minimal health care throughout their lives. One aspect of Y.O.U. tries to ameliorate this situation. When they arrive on campus, students receive a physical examination and have their teeth checked and cleaned. Conditions detected in these examinations are treated whenever possible. Although the Y.O.U. program does not pay for the treatment, every effort is made to keep the cost to the student at a minimum. Medicaid is used for those students who qualify. The Lions Club has been very helpful in providing glasses for students who need them. Dental costs have been very low since the dentist who does the examinations has donated his services for all follow-up treatments. Insurance is carried on each participant to cover injuries and illnesses which may occur during the time they are on campus. The purpose of the health care program is two-fold. First, students who are in good health can participate fully in the program and gain the maximum benefits of the program. Second, this care, coupled with the health instruction, may make students more inclined to take better care of themselves and thereby enable themselves to lead more productive and satisfying lives.

Counseling

The intent of the counseling component of Y.O.U. is to provide each individual with a positive self-concept, realistic career plans, and effective communication skills. The counseling program is staffed by a master counselor, who holds Arkansas school counselor certification, and by the residence hall staff. The master counselor was responsible for administering the Mat-6 and other assessment instruments that were used over the course of the program. A personality profile, a self-esteem inventory, and a learning style inventory were administered to the students when they arrived at the beginning of the program. The personality profile and the self-esteem inventory were administered a second time near the end of the program. A comparison of the results of the two administrations of the personality profile indicated that there were fewer extreme traits the second time, indicating that the students had more stable characteristics after being in the program for several weeks. The self-esteem inventory also showed positive results the second time it was given. The mean raw scores of the students increased several percentage points in general self-esteem, social self-esteem, and in personal self-esteem. These results also indicated that the defensiveness of the students had decreased during the course of the program.

The master counselor met with each student at least once for a get-acquainted session. Other sessions were held when

students were referred to the counselor by the staff or students could request to see the counselor. The master counselor also worked extensively with the residence hall staff to better prepare them to handle such topics as crisis counseling, dealing with anger and loneliness, and basic counseling procedures. The master counselor also met with the staff regularly to discuss administrative, staff, and student issues.

Another duty of the master counselor was to assist students in formulating career goals. Obviously, the goals established by students at this level have to be very tentative, but any goal gives the student something to work for, rather than wandering aimlessly through (or out of) school. The master counselor used individual sessions, small group meetings, and the Job Club to work toward this goal.

Recreation

The goals of the recreational component of the Y.O.U. program were to improve the physical fitness level of the students, to teach students recreational skills which could be used throughout their lives, and to teach students the value of recreation as a means of combating stress in daily life. Each evening the recreation director, the assistant recreation director, and the residence hall staff led the students in various recreational activities, ranging from modeling to weightlifting. Other activities included swimming, track and field, volleyball, basketball, pickleball, and racquetball. The recreational program also served as an outlet for the excess energy that is commonly seen in this age group.

Weekend Trips

Weekend field trips had an educational purpose and a recreational purpose. While each trip was classified as one type or the other, all of them obviously served both purposes. Field trips are always recreational, in the sense that they furnish a change of scene and provide a diversion from one's ordinary daily activities. They are also educational in the sense that they expand one's horizons and allow for new experiences. This aspect of the field trips was very important for the students in this program. Many of them had never been to a large city before. While in this program, they went to Memphis three times and to St. Louis once. Many saw their first museum and their first zoo. They also had the experience of two theme parks and a major league baseball game. A tour of a cave and a reconstructed Indian village were included in the itinerary as well. The weekend trip component of the program may well be one of its more important facets. It provides students with the realization that they live in a very large world and their possibilities are not limited to the tiny portion of that world that they have seen. Perhaps equally important, it allows them to see

other places as they really are, not just as idealized images where everything is perfect.

Follow-up

The final component of the Y.O.U. program is ongoing. Each student who completes the program is followed though high school. Students receive periodic newsletters and encouragement to stay in school. Their grades are reported to the follow-up coordinator each semester. They know that the program staff still cares about them. The staff, too, carries on its own unofficial follow-up. Letters and cards are exchanged between students and staff members. Of course, one of the purposes of the follow-up program is to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Although exact figures are not available for all students in the program at this point, preliminary data indicate that the program has been very successful. For example, of the students who completed the program at Arkansas State University in 1989, all were still in school one year later. The real test, of course, will come this year and next. One of the biggest challenges for the follow-up program is the mobility of the students and their families. Some students have had two or three changes of address since August. It is very difficult to keep track of these students, especially when their parents, for whatever reason, choose not to leave forwarding addresses.

Conclusion

The Youth Opportunities Unlimited program at Arkansas State University appears to be a huge success. Only time will tell if this proves to be true in the long run. The ultimate evaluation will be the high school graduation rate of the participants and their achievements afterwards.

The objective evaluation data which are available at this point look very good. The academic performance as indicated by the MAT 6 scores is nothing short of phenomenal. It is also encouraging that more basic characteristics such as self-esteem can be positively affected in a short period of time. Subjectively, the change in attitude of some of the students is incredible.

There are several reasons for these changes. First, the students are removed from home situations that are often impoverished and dehumanizing. Once they are in the program, they have their basic health needs met, and they receive three balanced meals every day. The staff members have been selected because they are people who care about the students and staff training emphasizes treating students with respect. The staff has also been trained to expect a great deal from the students. It has been well established that students generally live up to the expectations of their teachers and others who are important in their lives. The staff members have great expectations of the students, and the students

deliver on these expectations.

The one reservation which some leaders in the program hold concerns the time that students actually spend in the program. Does a program of eight weeks' duration prior to a student's freshman or sophomore year in high school have a large enough impact to keep the student in school until graduation? In some cases, the answer is no. In other cases, the program is a foundation which can be built upon by teachers and other school officials, by concerned parents, and by peers. The program can be the straw that tips the balance in favor of finishing school for some students.

Another component of the Y.O.U. program is Y.O.U. II. This program brings students back to a college campus for a second summer for more intensive study and it has a strong emphasis on service projects. Y.O.U. II was piloted at Henderson State University in 1990, and was deemed to be quite successful. Henderson State is continuing this program in 1991. If it proves to be as successful this year as it was in the first trial, it may be expanded to other campuses in the future.

Is Y.O.U. worth the effort and the cost? The authors believe that it is.